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# PROBLEMS BEFORE THE WESTERN FARMER.

BY THE HON. L. D. LEWELLING, GOVERNOR OF KANSAS.

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THE outlook at the present time for the farmers of the West is anything but hopeful, though much may depend on legislation. The financial condition of Kansas is probably similar to that of other Western States, and according to the United States Census of 1890 the farm-mortgage debt of Kansas aggregates \$167,145,000. But this only constitutes a part of the financial burden. The people are compelled to look to the natural resources of the State for the payment of most, if not all, existing obligations, and the total of these obligations is appalling. State, county, and municipal taxes are probably no higher than elsewhere, but the interest burden is the blight upon our prosperity. The following table is suggestive :

Real-estate mortgages on farms.....	\$167,145,039
Real-estate mortgages on lots.....	68,340,069
Municipal debt, counties, school districts, etc.....	37,817,755
Railroad indebtedness.....	459,892,907
State bonds.....	801,000
Chattel mortgage indebtedness of farmers, estimated.....	46,953,202
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	\$780,949,972

This shows a total indebtedness of nearly five hundred dollars for every man, woman, and child in the Commonwealth. It may be assumed that the railroad indebtedness should not thus be charged to the people, but leaving out this amount the remainder is sufficient to afford food for reflection. Forty-three per cent. of our agricultural class, embracing nearly eighty thousand families, are tenant farmers, and many of these are paying an enormous rate of interest upon chattel mortgages. It is said with much truth that the entire burden of debt hanging over the Western and Southern States must be paid by the agricultural

class. And yet in Kansas more than ten thousand persons of this class are annually dispossessed of their homes in consequence of the foreclosure of mortgages, and the number is probably increasing rather than diminishing. Interest grows by day and by night, through the wet season and the dry, while land values decline and the price of products steadily depreciates; and "the end is not yet." The Commissioner of Labor says that the people of the State during the last ten years have practically lost nearly three millions of dollars because of declining prices of corn and wheat.

Twenty-five to twenty-eight years ago, with one bale of cotton a Southern farmer could buy nearly five hundred dollars, and with one sack of wheat (two bushels) a Northern farmer could buy five dollars. Now it requires seventeen bales of cotton and more than six sacks of wheat to bring these respective amounts. What is true of cotton and wheat is also true of other products of the farm. A few years ago an average horse would have been regarded as sufficient security for fifty to seventy-five dollars; but to-day it would require eight horses of the same kind to secure an equal amount. The farm which was regarded as ample security for fifteen hundred dollars is in many instances now sold for the mortgage, or perhaps less. And thus well-to-do farmers are being gradually forced into bankruptcy. Throughout the West, men who would borrow money find it impossible to offer security. The land remains, there are hogs and cattle and sheep, and the soil is as productive as ever; but none of these things has sufficient value. A man of my acquaintance recently went to market with a load of horses of average grade and received for the entire twenty-two head two hundred and twenty dollars; after paying freight and other expenses the horses netted him six dollars and fifty cents.

It is estimated to cost fifty cents a bushel to raise wheat, but it is worth in the home market forty cents. Five years ago the West had a great corn crop, Kansas producing 138,000,000 bushels; and while the price in Chicago and other central points was fair, it was mostly consumed in the payment of freight. With the declining price of farm products, interest on money remaining unchanged, and only a comparatively trifling reduction in the price of such things as the farmer must buy, he found it almost, if not quite, impossible to make a living on the farm.

It was the unrest occasioned by these conditions in many Western and Southern States that caused the political revolt of the Farmers' Alliance a few years ago. Kansas was first to make a political protest. In all great grain and cotton producing States the farmers met in their schoolhouses to discuss the situation, and thus became more familiar with the history of the financial legislation of our own and other countries, and this investigation led to political organizations through which it was hoped to secure relief. As a drowning man catches at a straw, so persons in distress from other causes are ready to seize upon every proposition which promises relief. And it may be admitted that some of the remedies proposed by the farmers were visionary and impossible of application to existing conditions. But the body politic was very sick; and as every dose of medicine is said to be an experiment, so the people felt justified in prescribing some remedies which may have been doubtful.

To comprehend the condition of the Western farmers it must be understood that they are largely a debtor class, and they feel that in the gradual shrinkage of values they have been wronged. They also believe legislation to be responsible for this shrinkage, and look to legislation for the remedy. It was for this reason that the Alliance became a semi-political organization, and ardently supported the People's party, which declared for certain measures of relief demanded by the farmers. The Sub-Treasury plan was advocated by many members of the Alliance at one time, but in discussing details there was a wide divergence of opinion, and on account of this lack of agreement this plank, which appeared in the earlier platforms of the Populist party, subsequently disappeared.

The West is largely dependent upon the success and prosperity of its agricultural interests, and the political movement originating in the Farmers' Alliance, then developing into the Populist party, was and is in fact nothing more nor less than a defensive warfare for the preservation of the few privileges which remain to the agriculturist. With even moderate returns for their products the farmers would have been satisfied; but with the low prices, each year tending lower, interest and taxes became more burdensome, and attention was called to the enormous amount of money each year forwarded to the Eastern mortgage-holder. It was argued that the total increase of wealth in the United States since the

foundation of the government had not exceeded three per cent. per annum, and yet the Western farmers were compelled to pay tribute to money-lenders of six, eight, ten, and even twelve per cent. per annum, and were thus speedily driving forward toward bankruptcy. The conditions were emphasized in Kansas by pointing to the ten thousand farm people made homeless every year by mortgage foreclosures, who, being thus deprived of their homes, were made dependent on their labor for support, and thus swelled the great army of the unemployed. This, indeed, was the bond of sympathy everywhere between the farmer and laborer, and may account in some measure for the lively sympathy manifested by the farmers for striking laborers and the so-called Industrial Army. Each argued that he, himself, might soon become one of the homeless and unemployed. And this is one reason why partisan feeling became so intense among Populists. It was akin to the spirit of the Crusaders. The home and fireside, the happiness of children, the destiny of the unborn, seemed trembling in the balance, and all this was brought out in strong colors by many touching scenes. The newspapers made mention of a woman with three helpless little ones who made her home under a bridge on the highway. She was unable to find employment; too many in like circumstances, but without children, were offering their services. An old soldier dropped dead of starvation on the doorstep of the Court-house in Creston, Iowa, and it was afterwards ascertained that he had lived for days without cooked food, the last four days subsisting on wheat and water. These are only two of many instances which found their way into the newspapers and inspired the disciples of Populism to promulgate their doctrines with a sort of politico-religious enthusiasm seldom witnessed in political campaigns.

It is probable that the situation of the Western farmer might be improved by a better adaptation of crops to the soil and climate. There are some products, notably sorghum, Kaffir corn, alfalfa, and the like, which seem especially adapted to the more arid regions of the West; but the process of irrigation is now revealing new possibilities for these regions, and much progress has been made in the last two years in irrigating from wells in the bottom-lands. This method of farming would now receive wonderful impetus were it not that products thus raised, while generally better than those produced by old methods, still bring

prices not at all commensurate with the labor and expensive methods of production. Indeed there is little hope for the Western farmer until business can be again stimulated and labor employed, so that the laborer may have money with which more freely to buy the products of the farm. It is none the less true, because paradoxical, that higher prices will be beneficial both to the producer and the laborer who must buy. It cannot be said that there is too much produced while men and women, honest and willing to work, are ill clad and unfed ; while ten needy and shelterless women are struggling to secure every position offered for employment ; and while bread-riots occur in the cities. While these things are true, it cannot be argued that there is too much bread or that the low prices result from over-production. If then there is no over-production, we must look elsewhere for the cause of low prices as well as the unrest and suffering among the people. To find the cause and remedy for these conditions is therefore the problem now before the Western farmer.

The Western farmer is a philosopher from necessity. Rapidly tending toward poverty, he demands to know why, and is intelligent enough to answer his own question in the light of reason. He believes the prime cause of all his woes is the manipulation of the money system of the country by unscrupulous and mercenary interests. He believes the decline of prices follows shrinkage of the volume of money in circulation, and that shrinkage in volume results from legislation. He does not believe that the government should increase the interest burden by borrowing gold, while our native hills are filled with silver, and labor stands idly awaiting an opportunity to take it from its hiding-place. He believes that government is, or should be, for the good of all the people, and that legislation should be for the multitude rather than for the few. He believes that government should afford protection to the weak ; and he believes, finally, that if government, which assumes to guarantee life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, in reality guarantees nothing but wretchedness and want government has failed in its mission, and that he is living in an age of exquisitely refined barbarism rather than in the noonday light and love of Christian charity and progressive civilization.

L. D. LEWELLING.